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# American Exceptionalism and Technological Development

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# American Exceptionalism and Technological Development

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# American Exceptionalism and Technological Development

Posted on **December 1, 2005** by **Editor**



By **Jeffrey Barlow** <barlowj@pacificu.edu>

Editor, *Interface*

## Introduction

This is the second of a three-part editorial dealing with how best to understand long-term historical patterns of economic development. We believe that these are not merely esoteric intellectual questions, but are directly relevant to our understanding of our present, and of our immediate future.

In Part I we laid out the issues involved and introduced two conflicting paradigms or perspectives. [1] The first we termed the “Eurocentric.” It argues that first Europe, then later America, was possessed of unique advantages that gave it the ability to lead the world in the development of not only technology, but of the process of modernization itself.

This unique pattern consisted primarily of cultural attributes that gave Europeans and their American descendants critical traits of creativity, curiosity, and a drive for excellence that gave them the lead in developing the key institutions, machines, ideas, and values most conducive to industrial development.

By implication, these cultural values are enduring ones woven into the very fabric of American life, and will continue, despite temporary fluctuations in patterns of growth, to guarantee continued American dominance.

Moreover, these Euro-American cultural values, it is argued, are the only model that leads to full economic development. Nations that adopt it succeed; those that do not, fail.

However, there has developed over the last several decades a second paradigm, a series of

critiques of this model. In the next issue we will consider it. Here we flesh out the Eurocentric argument for American Exceptionalism.

## Our Approach

For our framework for presenting the Eurocentric argument, we utilize David S. Landes' work, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations. Why Some Are So Rich and Some Are So Poor*. It was published in 1998 and an Epilogue added for the paperback edition in 1999. [2] Landes' work met astonishing critical acclaim for both content and style. [3]

Landes' expertise, as the author of a series of earlier books on economic development, was beyond reproach. Landes, moreover, is ideal for our purpose because he met the critics of the Eurocentric Exceptionalist position head-on, in an often acerbic and confrontational manner that nicely highlights the differences between the two positions.

Landes' argument, as well as his style, is evident in this summary:

Until very recently, over the thousand and more years of this process that most people look upon as progress, the key factor—the driving force—has been Western civilization and its dissemination: the knowledge, the techniques, the political and social ideologies, for better or worse. This dissemination flows partly from Western dominion, for knowledge and know-how equal power; partly from Western teaching; and partly from emulation. Diffusion has been uneven, and much Western example has been rejected by people who see it as aggression. [4]

The very purpose of Landes' work was to explain “Why some are so rich and some are so poor.” To do so he began with a discussion of geography and its impact on development, but like Landes himself here we will pass quickly onto those elements for which the Europeans can themselves rightly be praised.

## Key Elements in Western Economic Development

Landes view, and that of the Euro-Centric Exceptionalist position in general, is that key elements in European culture created unique advantages for economic development. As we all know, the European story begins with the Greek city-states, particularly with Athens, fountainhead of democracy itself. For Landes, as for many others, the foundation of democracy was the concept of private property, inextricably linked to the rights of free citizens. The very concept of economic development was, then, in Landes' view, a “Western invention”. [5] The genius of Europe, while clearly visible, was not permitted free rein, however, until the 11th century A.D. It was only then that Europe could defend itself against alien invaders and concentrate upon economic progress as opposed to mere existence.

This new era was to see five centuries of an economic revolution without precedent since the Neolithic era. Progress was both technological and ideational. It saw the rapid development of

new technologies such as the wheeled plow, new agricultural techniques such as different forms of crop rotation, and creative forms of business organization such as new modes of association, contract, and exchange. The latter, and much of the inspiration for the former as well, came not from rulers or states, but from the mercantile community. [6]

The true genius of Europeans could be seen in this era with the “invention of invention” — the rapid development of technological devices which liberated labor for more pleasant and productive pursuits. Among the examples which Landes feels particularly noteworthy are included [7]:

- the water wheel
- eyeglasses
- the clock
- printing
- Gunpowder

This dynamic start was to give Europeans a lead that they were never to relinquish. The blossoming of their true creativity, however, was to come in the 15th century with “The Great Opening,” the age of European exploration. In this new era, Europeans did no more than give play to a fundamental element of human nature, the desire for conquest. [8] This era gave Europeans access to new resources and new lands for political and economic expansion. One of those, of course, was America, which would later become the vessel into which European creativity would be poured.

The next great period of European creativity, and the era which truly defines both our own time and the essence of the European spirit, was the Industrial Revolution. This began in the 18th century and in some senses still continues. Landes concentrates primarily upon new modes of bringing various forms of power to industrial tasks, such as steam- and water-power to textile production or metallurgy. [9]

Much more could be said about Landes exciting tour of the development of critical forms of technology and organization which have formed the world in which we live. But the above gives an adequate flavor of the key points of Landes argument, and of his spirited defense of the notion of European Exceptionalism. And for most of us, it is, after all, little more than a reminder of histories we have learned and appreciated from the time we began to understand the Euro-American past.

### **The Root Causes of Euro-American Exceptionalism**

The causes of the Exceptionalist history are complex. We catch glimpses, of course, in the unique genius of the Greeks. Likewise we admire the pioneering spirit of the long list of European inventors and explorers such as Galileo, Newton, Columbus, De Gama, and the many unknown and unsung tinkerers who gave us our rich panoply of modern tools and techniques. But why

them and not non-Europeans? Why Europe?

While the answer may lay in part in fortunate geographic placement, the major answer, and the one that lets us properly appreciate the genius of Europeans, and thus of ourselves, lies in culture. European Judeo-Christian beliefs uniquely nourished those human factors critical to economic development, such as hard work, thrift, creativity, and many more deeply imbedded in our very being.

In understanding culture and development, the critical intellectual figure to Landes is Max Weber. As Landes says, “Here Max Weber was right on.” [10] Weber’s ideas are very complex and steeped in the architectonic prose of late 19th-century Positivism. But once again Landes comes to our aid with an able summary while explaining the European spirit of innovation and discovery. He lists the following elements as important ones listed by specialists:

- Judeo-Christian respect for manual labor
- Judeo-Christian subordination of nature to man
- Judeo-Christian sense of linear time
- The market: “Enterprise was free in Europe.” [11]

It was Max Weber who first gave the peculiar constellations of virtues of the bourgeois of his time the title the “Protestant Ethic.” He traced these back to the unique relationship between Protestant Christians and their God.

Landes himself is not always insistent upon a tight connection between the values and the religious beliefs (Japanese, too, have a Protestant Ethic, Landes believes, which also accounts for their relative success in economic development. [12]). But in Weber’s view it is Protestant Christianity, particularly its ascetic concern for accumulation as a sign of god’s favor as well as the means necessary to earn that favor, which accounts for European success.

### **But What About Asia?**

While Landes may well be accused of an overweening enthusiasm for the notion of European Exceptionalism, he cannot be accused of ignoring the scholarship of the last fifty years. Recently we have learned much about non-European contributions to the modern world. Landes takes great care to confront known facts—such as that China invented both gunpowder and printing—while defending the Exceptionalism of the European contribution. His position might amount, if expressed conversationally, to a repeated declaration such as: “Sure, they made some early contributions, but look, they didn’t do anything with them!”

Landes takes great care to construct not only the case for European Exceptionalism, but its mirror image counter-case, the failure of Asian countries to develop. China is the example most often discussed, usually for its failure to sustain initial bursts of creativity. Muslim civilization too, comes in for its share of prolepsis, and occasionally India and even Africa are held up by Landes

for our critical scrutiny.

In dealing with China in particular, and often by implication with all Asian societies, Landes often refers to another German sociologist, Karl Wittfogel. [13] Wittfogel is known for the concept of “Oriental Despotism,” which might be taken as his answer to the question of what it was that Asians had instead of the Protestant Ethic of Weber.

Wittfogel analyzed in detail the long-time observations of many historians that societies based on the control of water were often associated with the rise of ancient civilizations. Wittfogel’s particular focus was ancient China, where, he observed, the need to control water led to the development of a very powerful state. This state came to hold a monopoly in coercive power and hence competing groups, such as the bourgeoisie of European city states, simply could not develop. As a result, the very idea of overarching central power and totalitarian organization became the norm; all groups and interests danced around that central pole.

Within such a society, Landes repeatedly notes, innovation, let alone democracy and free markets, could not possibly develop. And just as the spirit of the Greeks permeates modern American society, so do the totalitarian shades of the Chinese emperors permeate Chinese society to the present.

So not only, in Landes view, did Europe have exceptional advantages, but Asian societies, and China in particular, had exceptional disadvantages. This is the reason why some are so rich, and some are so poor.

## Conclusion

We have tried to fairly represent both the letter and the spirit of Landes’ position here. And it is important to remind ourselves that the European Exceptionalist position does not rise or fall with Landes’ single work. Generations of scholars, and by no means only European ones, have prepared the groundwork for Landis. He is not the sole authority in this field, merely the most recent, successful, and entertaining one.

In our conclusion, to be published in February, we will turn to the various attacks which have been launched at the Eurocentric Exceptionalist position and consider their implications for our own time.

Jeffrey Barlow  
Director, Berglund Center for Internet Studies

[1] For part I see: Jeffrey Barlow, “Paradigms of World history and American Technology” <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2005/06/edit.php>

[2] Landes, David S. *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations. Why Some Are So Rich and Some Are*

*So Poor*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.

[3] For a strong supportive review that brings up many of the points which made the book so popular, see that by J. Bradford DeLong, Professor of Economics at U.C. Berkeley, found at:[http://econ161.berkeley.edu/Econ\\_Articles/Reviews/landes.html](http://econ161.berkeley.edu/Econ_Articles/Reviews/landes.html) For excerpts from some of the many very positive reviews see<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/product-description/0393318885/104-9057002-3835169>

[4] Landes, David S. *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations. Why Some Are So Rich and Some Are So Poor*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. p. 513

[5] p. 31-2.

[6] Landes, 42-44.

[7] Landes, 45-59.

[8] P. 63.

[9] Landes, Chapter 13.

[10] Landes, 516. For substantial excerpts from Weber's works, see:<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/weber.htm> The key document is Weber's essay, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" found at:<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/weber/protestant-ethic/index.htm>

[11] Landes, 59.

[12] See page 363.

[13] For brief biography see: <http://www.bartleby.com/65/wi/Wittfogel.html> See also <http://www.washington.edu/research/showcase/1949b.html> Weber and Wittfogel were, properly speaking, Marxists. Those accustomed to suspect Karl Marx as responsible for all criticisms of European society should be aware that Marx is just as fervent a believer in European Exceptionalism as is Landes himself, though doubtless each would recoil from the other's company, intellectual or otherwise.

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45 THOUGHTS ON "AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT"



**stocks capital gains tax**

on **January 30, 2014 at 4:36 AM** said:

Spot on with this write-up, I absolutely feel this web site needs a lot more attention. I'll probably be back again to read more, thanks for the info!

**internet marketing master's degree**

on **January 30, 2014 at 1:11 PM** said:

These are really enormous ideas in regarding blogging. You have touched some pleasant factors here. Any way keep up wrining.

**Daniella Bahar**

on **January 30, 2014 at 6:12 PM** said:

Great paintings! That is the kind of information that are supposed to be shared across the web. Shame on the seek engines for no longer positioning this put up higher! Come on over and seek advice from my web site . Thanks =)

**youtube.com**

on **January 31, 2014 at 2:26 AM** said:

Not being able to pay the taxes you owe after already completing and submitting your income tax preparation doesn't have to be the end of the world. If your accountant doesn't do taxes, but works in line with a small business tax preparation professional, this is also ideal. The internet tax calculation websites have other services such as providing tax returns online as well as having a section where taxpayers can find out their income tax status.

**fast Weight**on **January 31, 2014 at 3:35 AM** said:

We stumbled over here from a different web page and thought I may as well check things out. I like what I see so now i'm following you. Look forward to looking at your web page repeatedly.

**Hallie**on **January 31, 2014 at 5:20 AM** said:

This post is invaluable. Where can I find out more?

**<http://youtube.com/watch?v=lyOc7D7jXg8>**on **January 31, 2014 at 10:23 AM** said:

To locate the nearest VITA site, call 1-800-906-9887. If your accountant doesn't do taxes, but works in line with a small business tax preparation professional, this is also ideal. The internet tax calculation websites have other services such as providing tax returns online as well as having a section where taxpayers can find out their income tax status.

**<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEIQf1cuAx4>**on **January 31, 2014 at 10:51 AM** said:

This is only to the extent of any errors made by the company in filing the tax return. Therefore, the current tax planning environment has relevant placement opportunities.

If you anticipate being in a higher tax bracket for next year, you do the exact opposite of the above.

**youtube.com**

on **January 31, 2014 at 3:58 PM** said:

Use that experience as a reminder of what you are good at and that you are capable, and then move into your work day with that good feeling. As a self-employed tax payer, individuals must pay Self-Employment tax if net earnings were greater than \$400. Any payments made to licensing authorities are considered a business expense.

**Rickie**

on **January 31, 2014 at 4:58 PM** said:

I do agree with all of the ideas you have introduced for your post. They are very convincing and will definitely work.

Nonetheless, the posts are very short for novices. May just you please lengthen them a bit from subsequent time? Thank you for the post.

**Contractor Calculator**

on **January 31, 2014 at 7:12 PM** said:

Tax Planning Is Part of a Comprehensive Financial Plan.  
Tax planning books give entrepreneurs an opportunity to compute their firms' annual tax returns using easy step wise guidelines. According to this principle, it is possible to convert electrical energy into mechanical energy and vice versa.

**Jann**

on **January 31, 2014 at 8:00 PM** said:

For most recent news you have to visit world wide web and on web I found this website as a best web

page for latest updates.

**cash flow hedge**

on **February 1, 2014 at 4:23 AM** said:

I'm really enjoying the design and layout of your site.

It's a very easy on the eyes which makes it much more pleasant for me to come here and visit more often.

Did you hire out a designer to create your theme? Exceptional work!

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhFa3cvzKUo>**

on **February 1, 2014 at 4:26 AM** said:

On the other hand, you may dislike the idea of not forming your own brand.

As a self-employed tax payer, individuals must

pay Self-Employment tax if net earnings were greater than \$400.

If you are considering obtaining accident insurance for the self employed, you should look into general self employed insurance coverage too.

**Umbrella Company**

on **February 1, 2014 at 6:56 AM** said:

That means if you have cancer, diabetes, weight problems,

or a host of other physical ailments then you will be denied coverage

with a Florida individual health insurance policy. It will be

easier to track your deductible expenses if they are

not commingled with your personal expenses. If you work from home, close the room door

while you are working.

**work from home data entry jobs in nj**

on **February 1, 2014 at 10:20 AM** said:

We absolutely love your blog and find most of your post's to be exactly what I'm looking for.

Would you offer guest writers to write content for you personally?

I wouldn't mind publishing a post or elaborating on many of the subjects you write regarding here. Again, awesome website!

**trading signals indicators**

on **February 1, 2014 at 11:26 AM** said:

Good day! Do you know if they make any plugins to protect against hackers? I'm kinda paranoid about losing everything I've worked hard on. Any recommendations?

**make money online guaranteed**

on **February 1, 2014 at 7:53 PM** said:

I do not know whether it's just me or if perhaps everyone else experiencing problems with your site.

It appears as if some of the text on your posts are running off the screen. Can somebody else please comment and let me know if this is happening to them as well? This might be a problem with my web browser because I've had this happen before.

Thank you

**car insurance fl ach rules help tax texas auto insurance rate georgia injury lawyer recreational vehicle financing business web site hosting small business mortgage refinance calculator rate dallas dwi lawyers debt consolidation mortgages sacramento crimi**

on **February 1, 2014 at 8:35 PM** said:

Hi there would you mind sharing which blog platform you're working with?  
I'm looking to start my own blog in the near future but I'm having a tough time making a decision between BlogEngine/Wordpress/B2evolution and Drupal.

The reason I ask is because your layout seems different then most blogs and I'm looking for something completely unique. P.S Apologies for being off-topic but I had to ask!

**mobile voip**

on **February 2, 2014 at 3:18 AM** said:

You can definitely see your enthusiasm within the article you write.  
The arena hopes for more passionate writers such as you who are not afraid to say how they believe. All the time follow your heart.

**Amy**

on **February 2, 2014 at 4:00 AM** said:

Keep on working, great job!

**Terese**

on **February 2, 2014 at 5:02 AM** said:

This will prevent us from achieving the abundance and joy intended for us when Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden. People often question whether there is any truth in the Law of Attraction at all.  
To carry out the polarity narrative, thoughts are rarely neutral.

**Rodolfo**

on **February 2, 2014 at 8:37 AM** said:

For now, yes, learn more about the Law of Attraction, but also be sure to actually use the Law of Right Action and do something. [4]There have been some truly remarkable stories about the placebo effects throughout the years, including victims of cancer experiencing miraculous recoveries from what appeared to be certain death. I struggled a lot the first seven or eight years and then I took the Landmark Forum and that really started turning things around.

**scratch capri mystic celebration klaxons beans math com expo the food network bigcharts sausage constellation formula one birthday party dubuque iowa bk elijah wood elan internet savings account accept business card credit credit and debt counseling sox c**

on **February 2, 2014 at 8:24 PM** said:

I do not even know how I ended up here, but I thought this post was great. I do not know who you are but definitely you're going to a famous blogger if you are not already 😊 Cheers!

**Creating A Bug Free Mind**

on **February 2, 2014 at 10:29 PM** said:

The law of attraction is activated in your favor when you are feeling good about the world around you. "If you've forgotten that those doubts and corrupted flashes aren't anywhere near as powerful as the thoughts that resonate with your heart, remind yourself. With one gene, call it A, when you cross an individual with a genotype of AA to an individual with aa, their offspring will all be Aa.

**Sherryl**

on **February 2, 2014 at 11:48 PM** said:

hello!,I really like your writing very much! percentage we keep in touch more about your post on AOL? I need an expert on this space to resolve my problem. Maybe that's you! Having a look ahead to peer you.

**affiliate kayak**

on **February 3, 2014 at 7:27 AM** said:

I'm really loving the theme/design of your website.  
Do you ever run into any web browser compatibility issues?

A handful of my blog audience have complained about my blog not operating correctly in Explorer but looks great in Firefox. Do you have any solutions to help fix this problem?

**Petra**

on **February 3, 2014 at 9:16 PM** said:

Wow, amazing blog layout! How long have you been blogging for? you make blogging look easy. The overall look of your site is fantastic, as well as the content!

**youtube.com**

on **February 3, 2014 at 10:47 PM** said:

A video of the confrontation at the meeting posted on You – Tube shows Immelt smiling during the police collaring of Gibson, and telling the laughing regents that, "This reminds me a little bit of some of the other board meetings I've been at. Other expenses that employee may be able to claim for are laundry expenses for work clothes, work clothes them selves and indeed specific allowances for any tools or equipment that are used by the employee can be claimed for if they are needed to carry out their employment. Therefore you could use an offshore or even an onshore organization to hold your bank account.



**facebook logout**

on **February 3, 2014 at 11:03 PM** said:

I'm extremely impressed with your writing skills and also with the layout on your blog.

Is this a paid theme or did you customize it yourself?

Anyway keep up the excellent quality writing, it is rare to see a nice blog like this one these days.

**Janice**

on **February 4, 2014 at 12:33 AM** said:

Hello, i think that i noticed you visited my web site thus i got here to go back the favor?.I am trying to to find things to improve my site!! suppose its good enough to make use of some of your ideas!!

**[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ws4YhYK\\_t0U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ws4YhYK_t0U)**

on **February 4, 2014 at 12:53 AM** said:

If you know how to reprogram the subconscious mind, you know how you can bring a whole lot of positive changes in your life.

People are divided whenever the issue of subliminal messages arise.

Below the surface, under the water, that iceberg spreads out in all directions.

**make money quick gta 5**

on **February 4, 2014 at 1:30 AM** said:

It's nearly impossible to find educated people about this topic, but you sound like you know what you're talking about! Thanks

**global resorts network**

on **February 4, 2014 at 9:13 AM** said:

Pretty great post. I just stumbled upon your blog and wanted to say that I've truly loved browsing your blog posts.

In any case I will be subscribing in your rss feed and I am hoping you write again soon!

**community**

on **February 4, 2014 at 10:18 AM** said:

What a funny blog! I definitely enjoyed watching this comic video with my loved ones along with just like my mates.

**nigeria entertainment news**

on **February 4, 2014 at 10:29 AM** said:

Thank you for the good writeup. It in reality was a amusement account it. Glimpse advanced to far added agreeable from you! However, how can we communicate?

**nigeria entertainment news**

on **February 4, 2014 at 10:38 AM** said:

upset for your huge analysis, but I'm very loving the post, and hope this, as well as the excellent analysis some other people have written, will help you determine if it is the right choice for you.

**people united for christ church**

on **February 5, 2014 at 2:20 AM** said:

Admiring the hard work you put into your site and detailed information you offer. It's awesome to come across a blog every once in a while that isn't the same old rehashed material.

Great read! I've bookmarked your site and I'm adding your RSS feeds to my Google account.

**christianity.com timeline**

on **February 6, 2014 at 3:53 AM** said:

Spot on with this write-up, I truly feel this amazing site needs much more attention. I'll probably be returning to read more, thanks for the advice!

**christian ministry list**

on **February 6, 2014 at 7:06 AM** said:

It's an awesome post in support of all the internet visitors; they will take advantage from it I am sure.

**christianity and homosexuality wiki**

on **February 6, 2014 at 7:32 AM** said:

Your means of explaining everything in this piece of writing is in fact pleasant, all be capable of easily knkw it, Thanks a lot.

**<http://www.iphone-topsites.com/>**

on **February 6, 2014 at 7:44 AM** said:

Actually when someone doesn't know after that its up to other

visitors that they will help, so here it happens.

**christian church programs**

on **February 6, 2014 at 8:02 AM** said:

We're a gaggle of volunteers and opening a brand new scheme in our community. Your site provided us with useful info to work on.

You have done an impressive task and our whole community shall be thankful to you.

**Sales management tools marketing**

on **February 6, 2014 at 9:51 AM** said:

Highly descriptive article, I liked that a lot. Will there be a part 2?

**saint peter eye care**

on **February 6, 2014 at 12:07 PM** said:

WOW just what I was looking for. Came here by searching for saint peter of tarentaise